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THE FORMATION AND SPREAD OF COLONIAL YUCATEC MAYA

The Spanish conquest of Yucatán had two main parts, the military subjugation and the so-called *conquista pacífica*, “peaceful conquest.” The military conquest was carried out by a relatively small number of soldiers, armed with swords, armor, muskets, horses, and dogs, and assisted by their indigenous allies. It came to an end, at least officially, in 1547. The peaceful conquest, by contrast, was carried out by an even smaller number of missionaries and their recruits, armed with the cross, religious vestments, Bible and catechism. The objective of *conquista pacífica* was to convert the natives into Christians living in accordance with *policía cristiana*, roughly “Christian civility.” The missions were part of a broader project known as *reducción* (< *reducir* ‘to subjugate, convince or re-organize,’ depending on context). The idea was that *reducción* was a critical step towards the ultimate end of conversion.

This talk begins with a brief outline of *reducción* as a total project, played out in three domains of the colonial world: the re-organization of space, the regulation of conduct and the reformation of language. Maya was the language of missionization, town level government and the medium of everyday interaction among Maya people. The process of “reducing” it involved analysis, translation from Spanish into Maya and the creation of a new register of Maya, at once Christianized and turned towards life in the colony. I will outline some of the principles guiding the formation of this register, and suggest that they overlap with those at play in the spatial and behavioral dimensions of *reducción*. Indeed the three dimensions were concurrently implemented and mutually reinforcing. We will look briefly at the rendering and practices of Christian prayer in Maya. Usually overlooked, since it is obviously not indigenous, Christian doctrinal language was actually pivotal in the transformation of Maya, and its legacy remains vital in the modern language. This is partly due to the way it spread through the colonial field, from mission to local government and beyond, and partly to its own semiotic properties which rendered it fragmentable, memorable and radically portable. Over the colonial period, *Maya reducido* spread into every genre of written Maya. Its appropriation by Maya authors marks the emergence of a new way of imagining language, space and the subjects who inhabit it.
